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There Will Be Scritches

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I drum my talons on the footboard of the Terran's hospital bed, my disapproving eyes moving up and down his battered body taking in the extent of the damage.

"Security Specialist Taylor... please tell me about your encounter with the a'Teksian mirkbeast." I say as sternly as I can muster. A look of shame crosses his face as he begins "Well... *hhmmhm* Cap... y'see... it's... erm..." I snap my beak in reproof and he shuts up "Your compatriots might have died, Taylor! Now..." I take a deep inhale of the oxygen rich ward air to calm myself "..tell me what happened."

Taylor steadies himself before speaking "I was safeguarding an expedition to the Twilight Zone on a'Tekzia 3. The researchers had spread out to collect samples and I was trynna keep my head on a swivel, you know what with it bein' a deathworld an' all. Then, from about 30 metres away, I heard Research Lead Sha'anza scream. Immediately, I saw her running and shouted to her to run to me. I drew up my shotgun and levelled it in the direction she'd come from, that's when I saw it lopin' after her... it was... it was..."

Here he trails off so I decide to interrupt "It was an a'Teksian mirkbeast, Taylor. One of the only creatures in Known Space that's a credible threat, even to an armed Terran, native Earth fauna excluded, of course. [300kg] of dense bone, muscle and sinew, six legs, each ending in two claws specifically shaped for optimal disemboweling of its prey, a maw full of upwards of 50 razor teeth! If we'd known that thing was in the area we never would have greenlit the expedition. Why, by the Spires of Akaros, didn't you just shoot that monster?!" he looks abashed but doesn't answer so I change tack.

"The reason it's a legal requirement to have a Terran escort on expeditions to deathworlds, Taylor? What is it?" blinking at me for a moment, he answers "You mean, aside from the obvious?" he flexes his unbroken arm, showing off a bicep thicker around than my chest.

I chirp irritably "It's not your strength, or your ferocity, Taylor. If it were something like that you could be substituted with a high spec combat droid! It's your sense of self preservation. You're the only sapient deathworld species known. You're supposed to have a sense for danger that droids can't replicate. You're supposed to have your wits about you in a way that the rest of us just don't and can't, having evolved on sane planets! So tell me, why did my legally mandated armed Terran chaperone decide to attempt to wrestle a mirkbeast to death instead of just shooting the Akaros damned thing!?"

Here a look of genuine confusion passes over the Terran's face "What d'ya mean 'wrestle it to death'?"

Confused myself, I glance at the holopad where Sha'anza's after action report is written "Research Lead Sha'anza indicates that after she had reached the relative safety of the shuttle she watched as you dropped your firearm, the mirkbeast skidded to a halt, a scant [metre] from you and you stared each other down for a few moments before you initiated a wrestling match by tapping it on the nose. This story was corroborated by every other researcher present, are you claiming that this sequence of events is false?"

The Terran scratches his stubbled chin for a few moments, seeming to think "Not so much 'false'... more like... misinterpreted? Me and fluffy were playin'!"

I'm utterly dumbstruck for a few moments before I can stammer out "P-p-playing!? By the Titan's Spear, Taylor! What do you mean you were 'playing'!?"

"Captain..." Taylor responds, now deadly serious "...it was love at first sight! Fluffy is the cutest thing I've ever set my eyes on! Like someone blended all the cutest bits of an otter, an owl, a kitty, a pupper and a baby seal into one big ol', distilled... cute! She was just beggin' to have that lil' button nose booped! After that it was ear scritches and tummy rubs and cuddle wrestlin'! We only stopped 'cos she tuckerred herself out!"

At a loss I ask the only question my mind can present coherently "How? How can you call that monster cute? I don't understand!" he frowns before raising his unbroken hand in a fist, is he going to punch me!?

Instead of punching me he extends a finger "One; she got these big old puppy-dog eyes, like woah, like biggest eyes you've ever seen on anythin'..." collecting myself, I respond "These would be the eyes specifically adapted to tracking prey in the permanent crepuscular gloom of its home environment? And the 'button nose' that you 'booped' would be the one that's perfectly adapted to allow it to smell a drop of blood from [15km] away!?" scowling, the Terran leans forward and says, in a mix of hurt and anger "She's a she, Captain. Not an 'it'!"

Alarmed now, I fan out my flight feathers in a gesture of mollification which seems to satisfy the deranged Terran. He extends a second finger "Those tiny little nublet legs with those adorable toe-beans!" "You mean the short legs that allow it-her to keep a low profile while stalking? The 'toe-beans' that allow... her... to both pad silently and retain traction in an all out sprint? And you didn't mention the [7cm] claws that... she uses to eviscerate anything unlucky enough to be caught by her!" waving his counting hand back and forth in a dismissive gesture he continued "Her floppy ears..." another finger "...her flapping tail..." another finger "Oh and her fur, Captain, her fur! You've never felt anythin' so soft an' silky! It's like strokin' a cloud!" a thumb this time. I refrain from pointing out the predatory functions of these attributes.

"Taylor, if you just 'played' with the mirkbeast then why are you lying in the ship's medical ward?"

Taken aback, he answers "This?" gesturing at his broken arm, bloodied face and bruised body "This is completely unrelated! After the end of the mission I had a bit too much celebratory whisky and ended up fallin' down Access Stairway 5. I was off duty but I know that's no excuse, I'm sorry Cap."

Masking my shock, I sardonically respond "So, the mighty Deathworlder who wrestled an a'Teksian mirkbeast in fun was defeated by a staircase after purposefully impairing his own judgement, is that right? Remember how you're supposed to have a better sense of self preservation than the rest of us?" Taylor has the decency to look guilty.

Trying not to look as wary as I feel, I approach his side and rest my wingclaws on the back of his hand. "Victor, my friend..." Taylor scrunches his face and responds "Nothin' good follows when you call me 'Victor'!" Ignoring him, I continue "How long has it been since you spent time in the company of another Terran?"

He thinks about the question for a moment "I guess it **has** been a while!"

I level a sympathetic gaze up into his mournful green eyes "Victor, I am at fault here. I must say, until today, the implications of hiring a lone member of such a highly social species did not occur to me. The next time we dock I will take on a few more Terrans and then you'll have some friends who will be able to keep you sane... by Terran standards. OK? No more wrestling dangerous indigenous fauna, no more whisky benders, no more falling down stairs. How does that sound?"

Turning away in an attempt to hide his watery eyes he responds in a slightly cracking voice "Yeah, Cap... That sounds good." Doing my best to mimic a Terran smile, I turn to go before adding "Perhaps, you should also look into getting a pet, Victor? You're clearly starved for this 'cuteness' you insist the mirkbeast exhibited." he responded "Oh, that's not necessary, anymore."

I keep walking and am almost out of the room before fear roots me to the spot, my crown plume feathers raise in agitation and I turn in slowly dawning horror "What do you mean 'anymore', Victor?" I say, barely keeping my voice steady. He averts his gaze "Victor, what do you mean 'anymore'?!?" more silence. "Victor, you didn't bring the mirkbeast onto my ship, did you?!"

Just then the lighting switches to an emergency blue and klaxons sound.